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Abstract

People do not live in fixed, immutable contexts; neither are their life-trajectories uniform. On the contrary, people experience discontinuities, breaks and transitions at various points in their lives, including their professional lives. The fundamental requirement for a transition is a social and cultural relocation, accompanied by the challenging, reworking or abandoning of former valid identities, routines and representations of reality. The construct of transition can be usefully applied to the study of professional trajectories, by offering a perspective that takes into account the dynamicity and uncertainty imposed by the change in professional practices, not just on the activities that take place in professional contexts, but also on the definition/redefinition/negotiation of individual professional identity. This paper suggests an intrinsic “dual uncertainty” of both the context and the individual during the change processes of professional trajectories. The paper provides a complementary outlook to the points raised in Daniels’ (2011) article on the mutual shaping of human action and institutional settings. Taking Daniels’ approach as a basis, it is possible to broaden the analysis of professional trajectories within rapidly-changing occupational settings, by adopting a perspective that takes into account the inherent open-ended nature of socio-cultural phenomena, the fluidity of living contexts, the permeability of the boundaries within which transitions take place and trajectories evolve, as well as the impact of these aspects on professional identity and on its role in processes of change.

Keywords

change, inclusive separation, mutuality, professional identity, trajectories, uncertainty

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To take the psychosocial construct of trajectory as a subject for study implies the adoption of a process-based, dynamic vision of the life experiences that involves social actors within continually-changing contexts. People do not live in fixed, unchanging contexts, nor are their life trajectories uniform, rather, at various points in their lives, and therefore also their professional lives, they experience discontinuities, breaks and transitions (Zittoun, 2007).

The study of psychosocial transition dynamics represents one of the most interesting aspects of current research on social development (Zittoun, 2006; Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson, & Psaltis, 2003; Zittoun & Perret-Clermont, 2002). Through this construct, it is possible to describe and understand what we generically term phenomena of change. The fundamental presupposition of a transition is a social and cultural relocation that is accompanied by the challenging, reworking or abandoning of previously valid identities, routines and representations of reality (Simão, 2003). This construct-transition can be usefully applied also to the study of professional trajectories, by offering a perspective that takes into account the dynamicity and uncertainty that the change in professional practices imposes not merely upon the activities that take place in professional contexts, but also on the definition/redefinition/negotiation of the individual's professional identity. Indeed, as bona fide "psychosocial transitions", these changes require the reorganization of occupational activities and the redefinition of the individual's schema of identity (Iannaccone, 2003).

The aim of this paper is to focus attention on the dynamics of change that affect both the context (with its rules, artifacts and activities) and the identity of the individual acting within it. By doing so, I hope to provide an outlook that is complementary to the points raised in Daniels' article (2011) on the mutual shaping of human action and institutional settings. More precisely, his paper outlines a methodological approach for analyzing data gathered during several workshops in which professionals, involved in child care services, discuss the actual change in work practices.

In my paper, on the other hand, I will attempt to identify, partly by referring to an empirical study conducted in educational contexts (Iannaccone, Tateo, Mollo, & Marsico, 2008), a series of "background" elements, which could be defined as the intrinsic "dual uncertainty" of the context and the individual present in the change processes of professional trajectories.

Trajectories and changes

Theoretically speaking, the epistemology underlying the decision to study the psychosocial construct of trajectory could be defined as a "weak model", since it involves a series of things that "move" in time and space. If we consider the question more closely, the concept of trajectory suggests a direction of progress, something that one "moves toward". The issue is further complicated by the fact that the progress takes place along an uncertain path, whose route (and, indeed, boundaries) are either poorly defined or are in the process of being re-defined and

this movement is performed by individuals who have to deal with transformations in progress and the need to find new ways of thinking and acting in specific institutional contexts. Although the individual knows that the ways of thinking and behaving adopted previously are no longer suited to the new needs that come to light in living contexts, they nevertheless represent the only ones available at that particular point and, therefore, represent the bases on which he can proceed to bring about a change. He finds himself in the difficult position of having to construct new forms of interaction with the social world, whilst still having to rely on old schemata. Consequently, in this case, change is not a concise event or break, but rather a slow, gradual transition that takes place over a certain period of time and can be conceptualized in terms of “trajectory”.

Actually, change provides an opportunity to fully comprehend “how things really work”. This phenomenon was focused upon by Lewin (1951) with his famous phrase “If you want to truly understand something, try to change it.” As we know, at the time Lewin was starting his work in the field of social sciences and, in particular, the issues facing the ethnic minorities in the United States and he set himself the task of testing a new technique that combined research with action. However, according to the author, change does not merely need to be observed and explained, but also provoked and then analyzed and understood.

To my mind, Lewin’s famous quote can be applied, in a broader sense, also to imposed changes involving the contexts in which the individual acts. This is the case both of the study of the transformation of children’s services and professional work conducted by Daniels (2011), and the one in which I participated (Iannaccone et al., 2008) that aimed to explore how Italian teachers “dealt with” the various reforms involving the Italian education system that have taken place over the past two decades and that have not merely affected the organization, but also the very role of teachers called on to redefine central aspects of their work and of their professional identity.

Reconceptualizing the interconnection between person and context

When a set of new rules, new tasks and new instruments is introduced into a professional context, for example through legislative provisions that are intended to restructure that occupational sector, transformation takes place on various different levels. Suffice to consider the changes to the organizational systems affected by legal reforms and the more or less profound repercussions they have on the other dimensions of the individual’s working experience from the purely operative dimension (professional practices and the tools used) to the interpersonal dimension (social interactions in the workplace) to the identity dimension (image of the self).

This kind of “perturbation” clearly affects both collective and individual levels. Its study calls for a methodological and theoretical framework able to combine macro-level analysis (what is happening in the wider socio-cultural world such as,

for instance, the international economic crisis or the increasing level of technology that transforms entire lines of business) with micro-level analysis (what is the effect on situated activities in a specific workplace and on the individuals). For a long time, social scientists have studied the two levels separately. Today the real challenge is to grasp their mutuality and interconnection. In my opinion, to do so we need to reconceptualize the individual-context connection in terms of inclusive separation (Valsiner, 1987) between person and environment, in which the organism creates the context and the context creates the organism in return, even if they are not melted into one entity. In contrast with the cross-cultural and “traditional” psychological concept of context, understood as something into which a person is placed, I emphasize the idea of link between context with the figure itself (Kindermann & Valsiner, 1995). In this sense, context is the background of a figure, and cannot exist separately (Marsico & Iannaccone, 2012). This fluid inclusion is well depicted by Escher’s Lithographs where some elements that are initially a figure become ground in an endless cyclicity. This creates a dynamic movement in which a relationship between those two aspects still remains (Marsico, 2011).

This idea shows an intriguing similarity with recent advances in modern biology, such as for instance, Rayner’s logic of natural inclusionality (2011). According to this evolutionary standpoint, any living system is constantly in dialogue with its natural neighborhood on the basis of an interdependent and co-evolutionary process involving both the context and the organism.

This theoretical perspective seems sensitive to the connections and mutual definition between different elements within the same whole and to the mutual feed-forward loop between person and context. It permits the adoption of a binocular vision that allows us, from a methodological point of view, to simultaneously look at what is happening “outside” and “inside”, and the way in which, for instance, specific occupational contexts interact with or react to new trends, emergency situations or the new demands of the manufacturing market, but also, on a situated, microgenetic analysis level, with how the individuals living in these certain specific contexts interact with the broader sociocultural phenomena and the formal and informal structure of that specific occupational setting. We also need to consider the repercussions in terms of the definition/redefinition/reconstruction of the professional identity considering the many individual and interpersonal factors involved.

The uncertainty is, consequently, two-fold, since it concerns both the context and the individual. Which elements intervene in the structuring of these dimensions and with what function? Certain transformations in environmental conditions would act as catalysts (Cabell 2010, 2011; Valsiner & Cabell, in press), sometimes propulsive, sometimes inhibitory of specific social processes, promoting (or reducing) the reaction of different elements within the psychological system. Moreover, following the biological notion of plasticity derived from Waddington’s epigenetic approach (1940, 1957), it is possible to highlight that, in such a fluid condition, different potential responses (more or less adaptive, active, predictable or reversible) of one individual to the various environmental conditions are possible.

Variability and ambiguity therefore become the phenomena to be explored, rather than stability and constancy.

One privileged position for grasping the dual uncertainty on both a collective and an individual level is that of being located on the boundaries of living contexts, whose walls are far more permeable than postulated by psychological research in the past (Marsico, 2011). This idea of a fluid, dynamic transformation (Rayner, 2011) implies a mutual adaptation between the living context and the human being, whose boundaries change in response to the contextual circumstances to which they themselves make a contribution.

Analyzing mutuality: A methodological approach

The article by Daniels (2011) is a good example of how to explore mutuality and the interconnection between the micro and macro levels involved in change processes. Daniels (2010, 2011), sets himself the task of understanding how the different ways of organizing specific, rapidly-changing professional contexts (child care services in England) modulate the actions of the professionals who work within them and vice versa, in what way do those same professionals learn new ways of acting that, in turn, generate changes in the institutions within which they work. By combining the perspective of Vygotsky (1934, 1978, 1987) with the sociological theory of Bernstein (1971, 1981, 1999, 2000), Daniels demonstrates that institutional devices and structures can be considered as historical-cultural products. As artefacts, they play an implicit or invisible role of mediation and regulation of human action within the institutional settings by directing beliefs, discourses, attitudes and everyday practices (Bernstein, 2000; Wertsch, 2007). Both the Vygotskian and the Bernsteinian approaches involve the ways through which historical, social and cultural factors shape human operation. According to Daniels (2006b), Bernstein's theory would provide the opportunity to broaden Vygotsky's approach through a better understanding of the tie between social structures, communication and forms of awareness. Moreover, in Daniels' approach (2006a, 2006b), the theory of cultural transmission devised in the later years of his career by Bernstein (2000) would share roots with the version of the Activity Theory developed by Engeström (1987, 1993, 1999) and consequently, their combination could expand the Activity Theory's analytical power, particularly as regards the effects of institutional structures on individual activity. After all, the workshops presented by Daniels in his article (2011) are broadly inspired by the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) approach and the activities of the "Change Laboratory" (Engeström, 2007; Engeström, Virkkunen, Helle, Pihlaja, & Poikela, 1996) based on Vygotsky's double stimulation method according to which subjects are placed in situations in which there is a problem and a set of tools for solving it. In Daniels' (2011) study, the use of this method in the workshops involved participants being faced with the paradoxes and dilemmas present in their current work practices to explore the way in which they solved the problem using tools already available in their occupational context or provided by the researcher. This means

that the critical events, paradoxes, perturbations and ruptures make change happen and are considered potential sources of development within professional trajectories. According to the model proposed by Engeström (1999) and later also by Daniels (2010, 2011), through a systematic reflexive analysis of work practices and the main source of critical aspects that prevent the development of innovative activities, it is possible to overcome a partial, localized knowledge, construct/negotiate new meanings and propose changes.

From a more general point of view, it is worth highlighting that, whilst it can be said that change takes place in situations that show instability, the corollary to this statement is that the researcher too must use conceptual and methodological instruments to “stay appropriately on the instable scene of the change” and interpret the transformation dynamics and interactions on which they are developed. In my opinion, this means that the researcher must know how to handle the tension and uncertainty typical of phases of transition and adopt a reflexive attitude to his research practices (Marsico, *in press*). In other words, the researcher must be aware of the features of his work tools, the viewpoints he adopts, the aims of his study and his own place within the study. The term “reflexivity” arises from this. Why is a given theoretical perspective adopted? What are its limits? What type of object is produced by the adoption of that perspective? These are questions that can be answered only by research practice, which is always partial and above all “situated” within the context of the study. It is a theoretical and methodological perspective that requires us to take into account the “uniqueness of the context” and to manage and combine different techniques with great flexibility and skill.

The role of professional identity in facing uncertainty

Taking Daniels’ approach (2011) as a basis, I believe it is possible to broaden the analysis of professional trajectories within rapidly-changing occupational settings, by adopting a perspective that takes into account the inherent open-ended nature of socio-cultural phenomena, the fluidity of living contexts, the permeability of the boundaries within which transitions take place and trajectories evolve, as well as the impact of these aspects on professional identity.

Perturbations such as psychosocial transitions, turning points and interruptions cause the challenging of the tacit methods of contextual operation and crystallized ways of acting. In this process, the first boundary is “done away with”: the invisible, yet highly demanding boundary of shared, consolidated practices and fixed identities. Change is therefore a privileged analysis for analyzing the central dynamics of the professional identity. After all, in a study on professional learning at school (aimed at creating a partnership between schools and external organizations for the promotion of creativity), Daniels and colleagues (Daniels, Leadbetter, Soares, & MacNab, 2006) focused his attention on professional identity as one of the components involved in the process of change in occupational contexts. Partnerships between schools and other external agencies require teachers, who usually work in conditions of professional isolation, to adopt new, more demanding

work methods. In particular, Daniels and colleagues (2006) point out how the teachers involved in the project experienced a feeling of unease and fear when faced with more flexible forms of working and with unpredictable outcomes. However, despite acknowledging an implication of professional identity (and its connected emotive aspects) in the transformation of professional activities, the work of Daniels and colleagues assigns them a less incisive function than I believe they should have.

In my opinion, professional identity plays a key mediation and modulation role in processes of change. By serving as a filter, depending on the dimensions comprising it, it would allow the activation or deactivation of certain elements of the transformations and perturbations present in the broader sociocultural context. Like a cell membrane (Belousov, 1998) that allows (or prevents) the passage of certain substances, professional identity is also more or less sensitive, reactive to “environmental agents” and generates adaptation responses that have effects in the occupational context, which in turn is transformed into a dynamic circuit of redefinition/reconstruction and mutual remodulation.

The double uncertainty: An empirical example

A set of empirical data gathered in the context of the Italian education system (Iannaccone et al. 2008; Ligorio & Tateo, 2008) would appear to support this theory, by providing a psychosocial model for processing professional identity in situations of change and by highlighting the complexity of factors (representations, biographies and practices) implied in identity adaptation processes stimulated by institutional changes.

Since the 1990s, the Italian education system has undergone several reforms. These sudden transformations have been accompanied by the new socializing functions attributed to the contemporary education system (Schizzerotto & Barone, 2006). Teachers are no longer merely required to “adapt” to continuous changes (in timetable, syllabus, etc.), but also to act as a “mediator” between academic and social requirements in a framework characterized by the pupils’ changing psychosocial characteristics and the development of new educational models within the family (Iannaccone & Marsico, 2007). This stimulates the teachers to re-adapt their educational practices and to identify new ways of relating with the social context. On a general analysis level, the social and economic redimensioning of the teacher’s role in the Italian educational context is reflected in the devaluation and low consideration that society would seem to have towards teachers. This contributes to the formulation of vulnerable identity dynamics (Kelchtermans, 2005) and poor appreciation on both a social and economic-professional level.

The study conducted in partnership with Iannaccone, Tateo and Mollo (2008) provides an example of the concept of the *double uncertainty* of the context and identity present in the processes of change in professional trajectories. The aim of the research was to analyze the teachers’ professional identity using narrative interviews in an attempt to highlight the critical aspects of the trajectories of occupational

experience in a context characterized by multiple changes. The outcome was a complex picture in which it was nevertheless possible to make an initial distinction between the static dimension and dynamic dimension of the teachers' professional identity. The static dimension appears to be connected to the meaning that "schooling" takes on, with particular attention to those elements that make up the central nucleus of the educational function: the educational models that guide practices in class; the overall perception of the teaching profession with specific reference to the social acknowledgement of the "profession of teacher". The dynamic dimension, on the other hand, includes those components of the professional identity directly interwoven with the processes of change that have taken place in the educational system and with coping strategies (Berg, Meegan, & Deviney, 1998; Lazarus, 1991; Moos & Schaefer, 1993) implemented to tackle them. Coping strategies can be divided into two main categories: active approaches and passive approaches.

The active category includes a search for greater professional skills (for example professional refresher courses), the identification of new responses to the new demands, the combination of old and new professional practices, forms of cooperation between colleagues, a boosting of self-esteem, through to forms of open contestation of the new procedures introduced into the educational system. Passive coping strategies on the other hand include those aimed primarily at acquiescence (for example, adaptation to new regulations), the preservation of consolidated procedures and models (in terms of safeguarding relationships with pupils) or indifference towards change. Teachers therefore react to change by trying to attribute a meaning to innovation by using different techniques that range from total closure and denial, to superficial adaptation responses through, in some cases, to a process of attribution of meaning and profound revision of the individual's professional self-awareness.

The research showed how the identity processes of the teaching profession involve several elements (static and dynamic) that provide a type of interpretational framework that is both personal and social (Kelchtermans, 2005), within which we can attribute a meaning to the change itself and define coping strategies to protect the idea of Self consistent with the individual's professional trajectory. These dimensions would provide teachers with a symbolic reference system for interpreting change, attempting to manage the feeling of vulnerability and low consideration of the profession's social value and redefine the personal schema of identity within specific educational contexts. The outcome is an ongoing process of negotiation and construction of meaning that involves representations, beliefs, skills, expectations, biographies and situated practices, as well as the social and organizational framework and material working conditions in a system in which the uncertainty of the outcomes represents an inevitable element.

Concluding remarks

In the case of professional trajectories subject to the frequent stimuli of a rapidly-changing context, professional identity would therefore appear to be a boundary

object (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), located on the boundary between the socio-cultural and economic-political systems that involve occupational contexts and the individual who, with his biography and experiences, acts in a specific professional setting. It goes without saying that the different outcomes of the process of reconstruction/re-modulation of the professional identity will also have diverse repercussions on the changes in occupational practices in professional contexts. The lesser the forms of closure or of superficial adaptation to change by the social actors, the more the occupational contexts will be renewed and new professional practices can develop. Under these circumstances, the mutual shaping of human action and institutional settings process (Daniels, 2010, 2011) is somewhat evident. In my opinion, the analysis of the dimensions connected with the professional identity could be combined with the approach suggested by Daniels (2011), thus improving its explanatory capacity. This method can also be validly applied for an efficacious management of the uncertainty and instability connected with the transformation of professional trajectories in occupational contexts characterized by rapid changes. It would make it possible to avoid the likelihood of negative repercussions on identity and the utilization of passive responses (such as closure, denial and acquiescence) in relation to transformations required in favour, on the other hand, of awareness by the individuals of the condition of transition and an active search for shared solutions.

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